

Educators' Cultural Competence in Higher Education: A Qualitative Single Case Study

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Abstract

This study addresses the issue of limited cultural competence among higher education educators and its impact on the English as a second language (ESL) learning process for English language learners (ELLs). The purpose was to explore educators' perspectives regarding their cultural competence to identify ways to enhance the ESL learning experience. Using Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a lens, the study examines how educators, as members of society, influence the ESL learning process. A qualitative single case study was conducted involving 12 educators, six of whom were part-time, from 10 academic departments at a community college in Southern California. Data were collected through 12 semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group with four participants. A thematic analysis revealed seven key themes: (a) limited cultural competence; (b) uneasiness toward ELLs from diverse backgrounds; (c) preparedness to teach ELLs; (d) slow progress in cultural competence in higher education; (e) limited institutional support; (f) instructional strategies to support ELLs; and (g) creating a safe learning space for ELLs. The findings suggest the need for institutions to provide support and cultural competence training, as well as to consider educators' recommendations for fostering supportive learning environments for all students.

Keywords: Educators' Cultural Competence, Higher Education, English Language Learning, Cultural Differences

1. Introduction

The composition of the student body, especially in higher education, has become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse over time (Han et al., 2020; Prieto, 2020; Sailsman, 2021). This diverse student body includes an increasing percentage of women, people of color, immigrants, and foreign-born students (international students) enrolling in higher education (American Institutions for Research, 2018; Prieto, 2020). Considering the growing diversity and changing classrooms in the United States, students' cultural backgrounds play a role in English as a second language (ESL) learning (Alzouebi et al., 2020; Sailsman, 2021; Yasmin et al., 2020). Students from different cultures, for instance, use different learning strategies in the classroom (Shi, 2018). Additionally, cultural backgrounds may restrict learner participation as actions and learning strategies are influenced by what the student believes and, therefore, may slow language development among English language learners (ELLs; Alzouebi et al., 2020; Shi, 2018; Yasmin et al., 2020). Therefore, as the number of ELLs rises, so does the need for educators to be aware of these cultural barriers and to know how to support students' ESL learning. This qualitative single case study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the higher education educators' perspectives regarding their cultural competence?
2. How do higher education educators perceive they support the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence?

The purpose of this study was to explore higher education educators' perspectives on cultural competence to understand how to improve the ESL learning process of ELLs. Vygotsky's (1929) sociocultural theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study to understand educators' perspectives concerning how they apply their cultural competence in classroom practice. Vygotsky developed the sociocultural theory to describe the relationship between children's development and society. Moreover, the sociocultural theory examines the extent and depth to which society and culture influence language acquisition. To enhance their higher-order thinking processes, culture or society equips individuals with tools through collaborative and meaningful activities. According to Vygotsky, human cognitive and cultural development are socially and culturally mediated by a series of factors, such as language, materials, signs, and symbols.

Participants' demographic and perceptual information were collected. Demographic information is participant information that describes who they are, their background, education, age, gender, and occupation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In contrast, perceptual information includes participants' experiences, perceptions, and long-held assumptions about the study's topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Through this research, participants shared definitions of culture, perspectives regarding their cultural competence, cultural obstacles encountered with ELLs of various backgrounds, and how educators perceived they support the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence. An in-depth exploration also shed light on participants' cultural teaching experiences, a more complete understanding of the studied problem, and suggestions for academic departments regarding cultural and diversity training.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Role of Culture

Culture is typically defined as certain types of food, religion, and social habits of a group or community (Mat Razi & Rahmat, 2020). However, the definition of culture extends beyond race and ethnicity and is also defined in terms of (a) preferred behaviors (being passive or active), (b) interpersonal values (cooperation versus competition), (c) preferences for learning (through teaching, experience, or both; Alshehri et al., 2022; Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020), (d) how time is seen (linear, cyclical, or in terms of events; Paris, 2023), and (e) how reality is seen along with age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status (SES; University of Kansas, 2024).

Students' culture may influence classroom learning. As classrooms are becoming more diverse due to students coming from different parts of the world, students may bring with them not only ideas and perspectives of the world but also their unique cultures and

diversities (Alzouebi et al., 2020; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018; Mat Razi & Rahmat, 2020). Studies support ELLs' written voice, or writing style, may be significantly influenced by their cultural backgrounds (Alshehri et al., 2022; Lee, 2021; McGann et al., 2020). Therefore, cultural differences, such as verbal and non-verbal communication variations and different meanings of words and terms across cultures, may become cultural barriers (Han et al., 2020; Lan, 2020). Cultural barriers often lead to classroom issues and impact teacher-student relationships (Badrkhani, 2020; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018; Mikkonen et al., 2019). However, the problem with cultural differences is that educators and practitioners often overlook students' native cultures in curriculum planning and classroom practice (Alzouebi et al., 2020; Shi, 2018; Yasmin et al., 2020). At the same time, the greater the cultural difference, the greater the barrier to communication (Yasin et al., 2018). Therefore, educators must recognize the potential cultural barriers between educators and students to ease communication and maximize learning (Hasanah & Abdulrahman, 2021; Shen & Chen, 2020; Yasin et al., 2018).

2.2. Collectivism and Individualism Cultures in Western Classrooms

Several scholars have identified differences between collectivist and individualist cultures that need to be considered, as they may affect classroom learning (Alshehri et al., 2022; Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020; Yasin et al., 2018; Yasmin et al., 2020; Yeh et al., 2021). For instance, Asian students behave more passively and conservatively, a characteristic of collectivism in Eastern countries (Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020; Yeh et al., 2021). Standing out is also unimportant for individuals from collectivist cultures (Lee, 2021). However, cultural shyness from Asian countries becomes a cultural barrier restricting learner autonomy (LA) and participation in English language classrooms (Yasmin et al., 2020). Although the reasons for non-participating Asians are not universal, it is essential to note that sometimes, reasons are due to contextual, personal, or situational factors (Yeh et al., 2021).

Collectivism prefers the use of collective pronouns “we” instead of individual pronouns “I”, and “group rights” instead of “individual rights” to reflect their collective belonging and commitment to the community (Alshehri et al., 2022; Lee, 2021). In contrast to collectivism, individualism, a feature often seen in the Western world, is composed of more competitive behavior with individual performance (Alshehri et al., 2022; Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020). Unlike students from collective cultures, North American students maintain their individualism by speaking up, passionately participating, and sharing opinions (presenting more competitive behavior) in the classroom (Alshehri et al., 2022; Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020). While asking questions and interrupting class is encouraged in the Western world, these cultural behaviors can be concerning to students from Eastern cultures, which may affect learning and participation (Alshehri et al., 2022; Keumala et al., 2019; Lan, 2020; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018; Yeh et al., 2021).

Other cultural differences between the Eastern and Western worlds that may affect classroom learning (Almotiary, 2022; Alshehri et al., 2022; Lan, 2020; Keumala et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020; Yasmin et al., 2020; Yeh et al., 2021). In the Middle East, shyness is a

valued and appreciated quality when interacting with the opposite sex (Yasmin et al., 2020). Because male-female interactions are not culturally appreciated, Middle Eastern girls are raised in a way in which they are not allowed to interact with family members (cousins) or argue with their brothers and fathers in a louder voice (Yasmin et al., 2020). Due to their Islamic religious practices, men pray at mosques, while women pray at home in the Middle East (Almotiary, 2022; Yasin et al., 2018).

Findings of cultural shyness also suggest potential differences in ELLs' behaviors and dynamics in mixed-gender learning environments when interacting with the opposite sex. In Saudi Arabia, all classes and even all sectors of life are segregated (Almotiary, 2022). Due to their society's segregation of males and females, communication between Saudi males and Saudi females is prohibited (Almotiary, 2022). If placed together in mixed-gender classrooms, Saudi women may react differently to a Saudi male than to a male from any other country (Almotiary, 2022). Therefore, it is likely that performance and learning outcomes will differ between same-gender and mixed-gender activities in Western learning contexts. However, this cultural barrier changes when Saudi students become more open-minded and accept each other after immersing in the American culture (Almotiary, 2022). Therefore, the literature supports that educators must consider further differences between collectivism and individualism in Western classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

A qualitative single case study was used to explore higher education educators' perspectives on cultural competence to understand how to improve the ESL learning process of ELLs. In qualitative research, triangulation efforts are essential to address issues of accuracy and trustworthiness (Billups, 2021; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Data triangulation involves using multiple sources at varying times, places, and with different individuals to capture various perspectives and experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Thus, I ensured data triangulation for this qualitative single case study by combining different collection methods (individual interviews and one focus group) and selecting participants from diverse academic statuses (tenured, tenure-track, and adjunct educators) and various academic disciplines as multiple sources.

Data for this study were collected during two phases: 12 semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group with four of the 12 participants, which were conducted on Zoom. Individual interviews and the focus group session were approximately one hour and took place during the summer and fall of 2023.

3.2. Instruments

In the semi-structured individual interviews, I collected participants' demographic (race and ethnicity) and interview data using questions adapted from the cultural competence inventory-preservice educators (CCI-PT) developed by Yang et al. (2020). In addition to their initial understanding of culture and perspectives regarding their cultural competence, the semi-structured individual interviews were also used to explore the educators' teaching

experiences, cultural obstacles encountered with ELLs of various backgrounds, and how educators perceive they support the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence.

I developed the focus group questions. The focus group collected data including shared opinions about their cultural competence, what educators considered their academic department was doing well, and what their department should do regarding cultural competence and diversity training.

3.3. Sample

The sample for this qualitative research consisted of a multi-disciplinary sample of higher education educators from 10 academic departments at one urban community college in California. Additionally, the community college selected for this study is among the two-year colleges with the highest number of ELLs in the United States (Ross & Moody, 2020). Through a criterion sampling method, I recruited 12 participants. I selected this study sample when specific criteria were followed or met by the participants.

The criteria for this study required participants to (a) be tenured, tenure-track, or adjunct educators currently teaching at least one class at the community college, (b) hold a master's or doctoral degree, (c) have 3 or more years of experience in the educational field, (d) have worked with ELLs in their role as a higher education educator.

Following informed consent, I assigned participants a pseudonym using a random name generator to ensure confidentiality. Data collection began after the identification and selection of participants. Participants' demographics, including their ethnicity and racial background, academic status, and discipline at the community college, are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants Demographics

Participant	Pseudonym	Ethnicity/Racial Background	Program/Discipline	Academic Status
1	Ana	North African	Modern Languages	Adjunct Instructor
2	George	Asian	World History	Adjunct Instructor
3	Tara	White	Communications	Tenured Instructor
4	Debbie	White	Art	Associate Instructor
5	Brad	White	Business	Associate Instructor
6	Jennifer	White	Early Childhood Ed.	Tenure-track Instructor
7	Lisa	White	Communications	Tenured Professor
8	Eve	Mexican American	Earth Science	Adjunct Instructor
9	Susanne	White	English	Tenured Professor
10	Steven	White	Kinesiology	Adjunct Instructor
11	Jason	Asian	Business	Adjunct Instructor
12	Victoria	Mexican American	Life Science	Tenured Professor

3.3 Findings / Data Analysis

The data analytic approach I adopted for this qualitative single case study was thematic analysis. All raw data—verbatim transcripts obtained from individual semi-structured interviews and one focus group—was transferred to NVivo.

The starting point of thematic analysis is finding common words and patterns in audio files and verbatim interview transcripts from the extensive data (Gibbs, 2018). With the assistance of NVivo, I progressed from an in-depth and thorough examination of the extensive data to the creation and reduction of codes from meaningful transcript data and, finally, to the development of themes (Gibbs, 2018). After developing themes, looking for relationships and differences between themes is the next stage during the data analysis process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In the final data analysis stage, I linked the themes to the theoretical framework or literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Findings from the focus group supported and contrasted each other with similar or different themes. To obtain a close review of data, I also looked for any outliers, unusual cases, or any missing data that need to be highlighted and may warrant further research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Based on the coding, I identified seven major themes from the educators' perspectives: five for Research Question 1 and two for Research Question 2.

Research Question 1: What are the higher education educators' perspectives regarding their cultural competence?

Interview data revealed information on whether cultural competence is evident in the classrooms, provided recommendations to support educators, and aimed to improve second language acquisition. After a thorough analysis of 12 individual interviews and one focus group, I identified five themes: (a) educators' limited cultural competence; (b) uneasiness toward ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds; (c) educators' preparedness to teach ELLs; (d) slow progress of cultural competence in higher education, (e) and limited or lack of institutional support.

Theme 1: Educators' limited cultural competence

I identified Theme 1 from educators' perspectives regarding their cultural competence reflected in their responses. Seven of 12 participants (58%) admitted to having limited cultural competence, which could impact the ESL learning process of ELLs. Jennifer, a full-time early childhood education (ECC) educator, indicated:

My cultural knowledge, I don't believe I have a huge amount of cultural knowledge on board. Something that I have been completely revising and learning all of the time ... How that impacts instruction is probably the number one impact on instruction.

Interestingly, only 25% (3 of 12) —those with a doctoral degree or pursuing a doctoral degree at the time of the individual interviews—indicated while they enjoy learning about cultures, it is impossible to know every culture. In this regard, Lisa stated:

You're not going to know all the different cultures. That's not possible, and what's specific to them? But when we start having judgments to go: "Oh, there might be something cultural going on here that I'm not aware of, and just watching for it."

Although most educators admitted to having limited cultural competence and all enjoyed learning about ELL's cultures, some recognized the struggle to know every culture. When educators possess cultural knowledge, they identify cultural differences but also explain and predict the students' behaviors of other cultures in the teaching and learning process (Hasanah & Abdulrahman, 2021; Shen & Chen, 2020; Yasin et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Educators' uneasiness toward ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds

I identified Theme 2 because despite being overwhelmingly positive toward ELLs as educators enjoyed learning about ELLs' cultures; they noted cultural differences and micro-aggressions between ELLs and educators across interviews. All 12 educators noted the following cultural differences when working with ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom. George, an adjunct world history educator and an ELL himself, shared, "The culture. I'd say culture...You know...some Asians from far east China, Japan, Korea, they tend to be more conservative...shy...That could hinder learning a language."

Anna—an adjunct modern language educator and an ELL practicing the Islamic faith—also noted cultural differences among ELLs of Arab backgrounds while doing group work in Western classrooms by recalling, "Some Arab [Muslim] girls like they don't like working in groups with boys. So then if I put in groups of girls and boys mixed, they shut down." However, no indication was reported that the educator, being a Muslim herself, used a strategy or accommodation to separate Arab females and male (Muslim) students for group work. Culturally responsive educators help reduce cultural barriers, minimize classroom misunderstandings and communication gaps, and improve learning outcomes (Han et al., 2020).

A few educators (3 of 12 [25%]), while acknowledging cultural differences, also admitted faculty's micro-aggressions toward ELLs:

I've had so many students tell me horror stories about teachers or professors and how they've been treated by them because they were learning English. And they made them embarrassed or made them feel stupid. And it just weighed on them for the rest of their life. And that's such a huge responsibility, so absolutely huge. (Jennifer)

I had a Korean student before I understood Korean culture very much. He was an international student. This was several years back, but I think about it often. This one hurts a lot. It was at least maybe 10 or 15 years ago.... and I didn't know a

lot about Korean culture. Yet, I still don't know...less than I should because you can't know everything. And he came into the class late. He'd been late a few times. And this particular day, I said: "You're late. Take a seat, but you're late. See me after class." And that student never came back. I lost the student. (Lisa)

Theme 3: Educators' preparedness to teach ELLs

I identified Theme 3 mainly from participants' beliefs regarding their cultural competence in teaching ELLs throughout this study's interviews, in which most participants mentioned feeling prepared (8 of 12 [66%]), somewhat prepared (3 of 12 [25%]), and not prepared at all (1 of 12 [8%]) to teach ELLs. Steven, an adjunct kinesiology educator, described feeling prepared when encouraging Asian ELLs to participate in athletic activities:

Working with ELLs is relatively easy because of the tools we have, and particularly for doing athletics, we can demonstrate a lot...In the activity class, which is mostly movement-based, I'm pretty prepared in that sense. In the lecture class, I think I'm a lot less prepared than I would like to think I am, so...And again, that's where you really have to be careful because they'll look you right in the eye and try to be polite and try to make good eye contact and it seems like they're understanding it, but they're not so.... They tend to not participate very much. If you want to participate, you've got to sort of force that.

A few participants (3 of 12 [25%]) mentioned feeling somewhat prepared to teach ELLs. Even though George emphasized teaching history and not ESL, George described feeling somewhat prepared to teach ELLs when using PowerPoint slides in class:

Yes, I mean. Most of the time I am competent. And also, when I am doing a lecture, I provide a PowerPoint because of my accent. The PowerPoint makes it easier for people like me ...with an accent. And students may have some problems with language.

Only one of the 12 participants, Brad, admitted to not feeling prepared when working with ELLs. While acknowledging cultural differences, Brad mentioned doing his best when working with ELLs:

I am not prepared at all... I feel like I'm reactive. I don't sort of come at it from a basis of experience and a sort of unified theory of what's the right way to proceed. Yeah, well, what you should do is...fill in the blank...and very much I do the best I can as opposed to...

As educators' perspectives resembled their preparedness to teach ELLs, they also revealed a slow progress of cultural competence in some academic disciplines of higher education.

Theme 4: A Slow progress of cultural competence in higher education

I identified this theme from participants addressing concerns with a slow progress of cultural competence in their academic departments while acknowledging the effects of lack or limited cultural competence in higher education. An overwhelming majority (11 of 12 [91%]) of participants revealed a slow progress of cultural competence in higher education, particularly across the art, ECE, and communication studies departments. Lisa addressed the slow progress of cultural competence when she shared some colleagues opposing changing instruction to accommodate ELLs from diverse backgrounds in her Department of Communication Studies:

You have other instructors who... just, "This is my standard. I'm not changing my standard. I'm not gonna change my..." It's like "Well, dude, your students are coming from everywhere, and you really need to bother to consider that maybe you're not doing it in a way that's helping your students anymore When you had all White males from the U.S., sure, sure."

Participants across the art and ECE departments, on the other hand, spoke positively about progress in their academic department in regards to cultural competence in the focus group:

There's been a real change in kind of the philosophy behind teaching art, and it's seen in... Both my schools are very different. And this college... It's no longer about learning art skills. It's about that art.... It's an opportunity to provide diversity and to honor it. And to reach equity. And we've been asked actually to change our curriculum to accomplish this. (Debbie)

I can say that early childhood education is the exact opposite (laughs). Every department is very quiet different at this college, and we are very laser-focused on diversity. We define it. We have looked at it so often. We've reflected on our own diversity within ourselves, and it's quite a bit. (Jennifer)

Appropriately trained, culturally competent educators can shape the students' experience by increasing student participation while respecting and admiring ELLs' culture to enhance learning outcomes (Badrkhani, 2020).

Theme 5: Limited or lack of institutional support

I identified Theme 5 from educators expressing limited or lack of institutional support while also verbalizing a call for cultural competence training in higher education. Six of 12 educators (50%) reported a limited or lack of institutional support. When asked what particular cultural group she would like to know more about, Susanne expressed a lack of institutional support and emphasized the use of colleague network:

My classes are overwhelmingly [Latino], and I feel like there's something, especially in this co-requisite class, that we could be tapping into that work. And I've been puzzling on it... I've been talking to, friends and colleagues about it. I haven't hit on anything yet... I am trying to figure out how we can leverage the strengths that our students bring that are connected to their identifies to help support them more in our specific class. Don't know what that looks like, but I'd like to figure that out or at least work on that.

Additionally, when asked about the major source of information that has shaped their cultural competence to work with ELLs of diverse cultures in the focus group session, other participants reflected on the support received by the institution. Among the comments cited were those of Debbie, who said: "Yeah [experience], because having the students in the class learning, watching them, seeing how it changes. I haven't gotten too much support from the college," and those by Jennifer, who commented: "I think probably the same. Experience. And any support that I get would be from my peers or from my colleagues who are also English, second language learners."

Most educators (9 of 12 [75%]) expressed a call for cultural competence training in higher education. Steven shared his call for cultural competence training and a better institutional response to work with minority students and ELLs:

Now it's been left to teachers to figure out this. And I just think that's a bad strategy. The issues that happen for minority students or English learners are generally institutional, and so they have to be dealt with at the institutional level... and then you're relying on, you're relying on me... To have enough self-awareness in that moment to notice what's going on, right? And like that's a hit or miss. It would be better if there was an institutional response to these things.

Victoria also expressed her concerns about cultural competence training in higher education. Since she completed her dissertation in the 1990s, Victoria highlighted the need for cultural competence training, not only in education but also in other fields, by commenting, "It's been needed in medicine in any... whether it's diabetics, physical therapy, nursing, whatever. It's been needed for a really long time. I mean since before I did my dissertation, and it's still very much needed."

Research Question 2: How do higher education educators perceive they support the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence?

Exploring higher education educators' perspectives on how they perceived they supported the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence revealed their teaching experiences with ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds. For Research Question 2, I identified two themes from the interview data: educators' instructional strategies to support ELLs and educators creating a safe learning space for ELLs.

Theme 6: Educators' instructional strategies to support ELLs

I identified this theme from educators sharing strategies they believed supported the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence. The strategies educators used the most were the inclusion of culture (all 12 [100%], giving extra time to ELLs (10 of 12 [83%], and minor instructional adjustments (5 of 12 [41%]). All participants (100%) embraced the inclusion of culture for ELLs in their instructional practice. When asked how his cultural knowledge impacted his instruction, Jason shared:

If I'm familiar with their culture, of course, I try to... It's very difficult to learn everybody's culture, of course. But if you're sort of familiar with the culture that your class has and what the students have, in terms of their culture, then it helps you create relevant examples in the class.

When showing PowerPoint presentations in her nutrition class, Victoria shared culture empowers students to get involved with the curriculum and participate:

I think it's affirming for the people in there. That you're bringing up their foods and their ingredients. You're letting them share their foods and their ingredients. You make an effort to get to know how their names are pronounced.

When asked what components of cultures she considered when planning instruction in the Department of ECE, Jennifer explained:

When planning instruction and components of culture, I think about our learning styles because learning styles are very much connected to culture. But a lot of people don't think they are. For example, you might have a child in your classroom who is from a culture where making eye contact with the teacher is not something that is ...that you do. You don't make eye contact with someone you respect. You look down. Someone who is from my culture might think, oh, that's a disrespectful person.

A majority (11 of 12 [91%]) of participants expressed giving extra time to ELLs based on educators' cultural responsiveness to ELLs' social and communication skills limitations. When she shared questions in her science class, Eve gave ELLs extra time to think about their answer: "And then I let them have time to write it down. Sometimes, they need time to think about it; they write it down, and then they have it in front of them so they can read it." Lisa, in her individual interview, recognized learning a second language is a difficult task and ELLs need extra time to develop their language skills by expressing:

English language learners are a little bit slower and hesitant to participate in the class. And not to put people on the spot, but I let them know that it's not really going to be an option because I'm trying to create a community. And a community means that you participate and what that looks like. ... And I find by week four, week five,

people have learned that they've got to figure out where they're going to insert themselves, so that they can participate. And they usually get there.

Additionally, when recognizing ELLs' challenges with English writing skills, Victoria shared giving ELLs extra time by allowing them to use Grammarly, a free writing software, artificial intelligence, and other translational devices:

And I tell them. It's OK that they're using translational devices to help them...but for them to let me know as best they can what they think would help them, or what I could do differently for them. Sometimes they do and a lot of times they don't. Grammar-wise, I work with the class as a whole on grammar. So, it isn't just certain students, it's all students. I show them that they could get free Grammarly, or that there are other apps too, basically AI, to help them. I know that as a teacher, I don't want to send something that is misspelled or... I will have Grammarly sitting in my e-mail and so forth, so that I can model for the students. ...Basically, all of us are still working on grammar through every class year. Not just teaching the science of nutrition...but also how to write a proper e-mail to a professor... things that will help them be more successful and...communicate their needs in a way that a professor understands.

To be culturally responsive, researchers support educators' verbal and non-verbal language, such as taking more time to explain content and concepts, making learning materials available, and being explicit with ELLs (Albusaidi, 2019; King & Bailey, 2021; Housel, 2021; Yeh et al., 2021).

Less than half of the study's sample (5 of 12 [41%]) expressed making minor adjustments to their instruction to help ELLs succeed in the classroom. On this matter, Anna, being an Arabic speaker herself, did not regard punctuality as important and made minor adjustments to her coming-to-class-on-time policy for ELLs from Arab backgrounds by starting class late:

In Arabic culture like we don't have this... like... being prompt on time is not considered important. So, like it's okay for people to be late. If that makes sense. So, for me like I don't mind it when my students are late because I am very used to that. So, I usually, like the first 15 minutes, don't do important things. It's more like low things and checking in so that way... I know they will come late...(laughs).

Lisa also learned being on time is not important in Korean culture and made minor adjustments to her instruction after losing a Korean student for being late to class a few times when she explained, "And I learned never to call a student out again from anywhere for any reason unless you really have a rapport with them to know that it's safe to do so with that student."

Eve adjusted her instruction using visuals instead of definitions in her science class sometimes as she previously stated struggling to understand ELLs' written work:

Sometimes, I'll have them draw on something. That's like an equalizer because it's just drawing, you know, like draw what a river is to you. They draw and then we discuss it. We talk about the pieces. Instead of offering like a definition, we look at a visual definition. And then, we go from there. And that, combined with those words, can be very useful because you have the visuals, and then you have the word.

In her communication studies class, Tara made minor instructional adjustments by "letting them [shy ELLs] create a video or some other project where it's not...Or a PowerPoint presentation instead of having to contemporarily ...contemporaneously speak. Whatever it is." While Ana supports minor adjustments in instruction for ELLs due to their holidays, she also challenged the idea it is not always beneficial:

Students have different holidays or days that are important to them... that aren't part of the college schedule, then it's hard because they're going to miss those classes to be celebrating their families ...then so... I mean, I don't know, like what's ever???... I usually let them make up stuff, but it's still hard because even if they make up stuff, they still miss the whole lesson.

However, when asked about suggestions to increase participation among ELLs in the classroom, Brad did not support making minor adjustments to his instruction by sharing:

I don't have good ideas. I like the design of my course where they gotta participate...I just.... There's no choice because I'm sure this is a huge issue. That this is probably an issue #1 if you're teaching a course with English language learners in it and your... It's an open classroom environment lecture. How do you.... how do you keep these students involved with...with without frustrating the other students in the classand embarrassing these students? That's complicated. I don't have any good ideas.

While educators' perspectives revealed their use of instructional strategies to support ELLs, their perspectives also resembled the importance of creating a safe learning space for ELLs.

Theme 7: Educators creating a safe learning space for ELLs

Throughout the individual interviews and one focus group session, educators mentioned building relationships with ELLs (8 of 12 [66%]) and bringing their abroad experiences (4 of 12 [33%]) to create a safe learning space for ELLs. Steven acknowledged the importance of talking to students at the door before or after class or around campus when he stated:

I can speculate as to why that is, but you need to develop a relationship that's outside of the classroom. And it doesn't have to be much, but just enough that you

acknowledge that they are there, like... we know who you are. That we are glad to see you. That you're welcome here, and we're happy you're here.

When asked about the most or least rewarding of her relationships with ELLs, Tara believed in helping ELLs feel like they belong even during office hours:

A lot of students go through homesickness, or they go through. They go through trying to find their way in a new country...When, like, students come to your office, and they like...hang out and they feel like a connection, and it makes them feel less lonely. It makes them feel like they belong, right? You really want to help them feel like they belong...

Upon reflecting on her cultural training, Lisa applied her cultural knowledge to build better relationships with ELLs from Korea outside the classroom:

As I was talking to a student after class and was face to face with him, I positioned myself so we were face to face, and the student kept moving to being next to me. Subconsciously, I kept moving to be face to face with them until all of a sudden, I remembered my training. And said: "Oh, plant your feet, Lisa. Let him adjust to what's comfortable to him." Afterward, I looked it up, and sure enough. In Korean culture, you want to be side by side. This is confrontational, right? (Uses back-and-forth hand movement).

Additionally, Debbie noticed students did much better after organizing Zoom meetings with ELLs to build relationships with them online "And all the students who have done that, do much better. But I'm going to require that they do to kind of make a link." In the focus group session, Debbie elaborated on building relationships with ELLs after class:

And I ask the students a lot about....to tell me like where they're from, what it's like, how it's different, why they came to the college where we are. Just to get them to talk and to share because often other students have a similar experience. But I learned a tremendous amount from them. It's amazing. And that continues after the class also.

When teachers show a supportive environment and openness to students, students not only feel a sense of security, which positively impacts their academic success but also improves their social life (Alzouebi et al., 2020; Housel, 2021; Lan, 2020; Mat Razi & Rahmat, 2020; Ponciano et al., 2020).

Only a small number of educators (4 of 12 [33%]) expressed bringing their abroad experiences to the classroom to assist ELLs. Because she is a traveler, Debbie admitted to bringing her abroad experiences to assist ELLs in writing papers after class:

I am sensitive to them and feel for them. I know how difficult... I'm a traveler, and I know how difficult it can be. I think most of them are kind of...they have a lot of fear, and so I try to support them...help them. I try to help them. They don't have to write papers in my class, but I try to help them. They might be applying for something... so I spend a lot of time abroad ...and connecting and understanding students with that. And I bring those experiences. They shaped me as a person and so ... as a teacher again ... and as an artist to help them understand in class.

Tara let ELLs choose their own seats or sit together to assist ELLs in the classroom when she reflected on her own communication limitations in Latin American abroad experiences:

Because I also let them choose their own seats in class...I've never been that one of those professors that, like, tells people where they have to sit because I feel like that's disempowering. And I do find that students like to cluster in class by people from the same countries that they're from. Which is OK. I mean, I lived in Paraguay for a couple of years, where I spoke only Spanish and Guarani, and I used to love to come to the capital city and meet up with other volunteers and just be able to speak English for a few days. So, I can understand the appeal.

Culturally, Tara further pointed out the differences between living abroad for a long period and having students from diverse backgrounds in her classroom: “I think it's less impactful to have students from different backgrounds in my classes versus living in other places.” On the other hand, Steven shared bringing his abroad experiences but found language to be a barrier when working with ELLs:

Like they were doing a basketball thing in China and. Yeah, there was sort of an administrator, who's Chinese and we're about the same age. And he did not speak much English, I don't speak, much Chinese for at all. We both love basketball....We both knew...we both could sort of communicate just through basketball, right? We would sit there and watch the games and we knew exactly what we each were talking about. And so that was always fun. I get those same people here. And if they are coming to the class, that means that we have some connection... in the same class learning the same stuff. That's always going to be a lot of fun, just seeing how many people reacted to things. The only hard part is language barriers, but that'... Google Translate makes that kind of easy.

Upon reflecting on their teaching experiences with ELLs from diverse backgrounds, educators shared building relationships with ELLs and bringing their abroad experiences as strategies they believed supported the ESL learning process of ELLs through their cultural competence.

3. Conclusion

Despite educators' limited cultural competence and uneasiness toward ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds, most felt prepared to teach ELLs, which was unexpected based on the study's research problem. Educators' beliefs on their preparedness were based on their shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with ELLs, the tools and resources used by educators, and educators' certifications to teach ELLs. Educators using scaffolding tools such as technology (PowerPoint, Google translate, Grammarly, artificial intelligence, and translational devices) and institutional resources (translators or referring students to tutoring services) influenced their preparedness to teach ELLs. I further identified that educators' beliefs on their preparedness were based on their use of language by explicitly demonstrating classroom activities along with body movement while others wrote activities on the board to communicate with students.

All educators perceived they supported the ESL learning process of ELLs by including culture in their instruction to get students to participate in classroom activities. Including students' culture in classroom activities motivates students to be engaged in discussions and, therefore, enhances students' language skills. As educators are the key to student success, improving educators' cultural competence will facilitate more meaningful interactions in higher education spaces.

Findings indicate educators made minor adjustments to their instruction to help ELLs succeed in the classroom. A few educators supported ELLs by using visuals instead of definitions and letting ELLs create videos or PowerPoint presentations instead of presenting in class if they were shy or not confident enough with their language skills. A few educators adjusted their coming-to-class-on-time policies for ELLs.

Additionally, I identified educators perceived they supported the ESL learning process of ELLs by building relationships with ELLs to create a safe learning space for ELLs. As faculty-student relationships shape student success (Curtis, 2020; Dwyer, 2019; Housel, 2021; King & Bailey, 2021), higher education institutions must consider improving educators' cultural competence to support and improve the ESL learning of ELLs. Further research is warranted to delve deeper into these findings.

5. Future Research

Three recommendations for future research are discussed in this section. First, the study's sample size was relatively small, consisting of 12 participants, with over half identifying as European-American. Therefore, future research with a larger and more diverse sample should enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, future researchers can improve upon this study by extending the sample size across institutions with multiple case studies and exploring several research sites. The final recommendation to improve this research study is a longitudinal study design. A longitudinal perspective could shed light on the evolution of educators' cultural competence over time and its long-term impact on ELLs' learning outcomes.

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